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ABSTRACT

Of the many things which are important to a student's performance, the ballot determines who advances in forensics competition and, ideally, offers a rationale for why some are successful and others are not. This paper aims to lay out guidelines for inexperienced judges and new coaches in writing a proper oral interpretation ballot. The paper also looks at past studies to see what other scholars have discovered in terms of oral interpretation adjudication. It offers a judge's taxonomy for oral interpretation, contending that there are five areas that a judge should pay attention to on the ballot: literature, physical delivery, characterization, vocalization, and technique. (Contains 13 references.) (NKA)

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The Lessons We Teach:
The Critics' Taxonomy for Effective Oral Interpretation

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G. Jensen

Many things are important to a student's performance, but one directly impacts it like no other. This is the ballot. The ballot determines who advances in competition and, ideally, offers a rationale for why some are successful and others are not. The ballot can also provide insights into a performance that a coach or student may have overlooked. The ballot is important for so many reasons. Students look to it as an explanation of a rank and a rating, as well as a testing ground for new, and sometimes risque' material. Given the great importance of the ballot, we should work to see that the person holding the pen has proper guidelines. This paper will attempt to lay out guidelines for inexperienced judges and new coaches (and even coaches who may a bit rusty in their interpretation training) in writing a proper oral interpretation ballot. It is, in a sense, the second part to a pilot study of collected ballots that I reported on last year. The paper will also look at past studies to see what others scholars have discovered in terms of oral interpretation adjudication.

Literature Review

Analysis of Individual Event Ballots: General

Numerous scholars have studied the ballot looking for trends, preferences and ways to improve the art of writing feedback to forensics students. Some have studied ballot length, some have counted comments, and still others have analyzed judges based on what they have written. Jensen (1988, 1990) focuses on

the number of comments made on original speaking ballots, as well as on the categories of the comments. Each time he chooses as his point of reference ballots with and without event-specific criteria on them. Jensen argues that the role of the ballot is an important one, stressing that judges should take a responsibility for what they write. He goes on to explain that as the list of events increases, so too does the responsibility of the judge. Jensen also believes that criteria should exist for writing a proper ballot. In fact, he believes that guidelines should be event specific. He concludes by stating that most judges are on the right track when it comes to filling out a ballot (156).

Olson and Wells (1988) also look at the importance of a properly written ballot. Through their study, they conclude that a good ballot should be thorough, thoughtful and contain a reason for decision. They stress that judges should realize the importance of their comments and the purpose of the ballot. Keeping this in mind, they believe that judges should structure their comments towards methods for improvement. They also cite Hanson's (1987) statement of what a good judge is, based on students' opinions: "A good judge writes comments that are concrete, helpful, truthful, and are in sufficient amount that you can learn from them" (20). Olson and Wells state that following these comments will help bolster a judge's credibility in the eyes of competitors. Their method focuses on comments made and their helpfulness, as well as the need for a reason for

decision on every ballot.

Numerous other studies have been conducted in an attempt to analyze the ballot. These studies can be used to help a person striving to better their own ballot writing, or one who is teaching others to construct a ballot (Dean, 1988; Nicolai, 1987; Preston, 1983). These studies can be useful in honing one's ballot writing skills.

Analysis of Individual Events Ballots: Oral Interpretation

A number of scholars have also looked specifically at oral interpretation event ballots and analyzed their content. Dickmeyer (1994) conducted a ballot analysis in order to determine if what IS occurring on ballots is in line with what SHOULD be appearing on them. Dickmeyer's method was to analyze the ballot as a unit, instead of looking at each comment separately. He reports that often times the ballot does not address a major concern of coaches that the performance lacks emotional or intellectual depth. Dickmeyer concludes his study by stating that when a judge is constructing their ballot, they should try to ensure that competitors derive the greatest educational benefits possible.

Trimble (1994), when looking at Cronn-Mills' (1991) study, outlines nine guidelines for writing an effective ballot. Among the criteria are: write a ballot, "flow" the performance, avoid jargon, and offer comments dealing with the competitors' emotional and intellectual portrayal of the characters.

A number of scholars have conducted similar studies that

investigate role of the ballot. (See, for example, Aspadal, 1997; Cox, 1989; Knapp, 1997.) If a person desires to learn more about ballot writing techniques, reading this literature is a great first step.

A Judges' Taxonomy for Oral Interpretation

When looking at a competitor's overall performance, there are five areas that a judge should pay attention to on the ballot: literature, physical delivery, characterization, vocalization and technique. There are many subcategories that fit within these areas and combined with the categories, they make excellent dimensions of the performance for discussion on the ballot. The first category that a judge should keep in mind is the literature. This is an often ignored category. Many judges are so worried about infringing upon expression that they are afraid to even mention issues literary merit. However, in avoiding the merit of a piece, bad literature is often undetected. There's nothing wrong with informing a performer that you think that their literature is weak. Many times students sacrifice merit for uniqueness. Striving to find a piece that has never been heard before, a competitor may select a piece that is on the fringe or they may even write a piece themselves just to achieve a performance that is different than others. Just because a piece is written by the student, or is little known does not inherently make it a bad piece. In fact, these unique selections are often very good, but a judge needs to be on the lookout for bad literature.

The next area that a judge should take into consideration when writing a ballot is physical delivery. This is a very important aspect of the performance. Purposeful physical animation must appear to be very natural if it is to be believed. If this part of the performance is off, the performer is not convincing. More specifically, the judge should look for the student to be gesturing accordingly. As mentioned above, gestures need to be very natural. The last thing that a person wants to see is a competitor talking about the sun rising and setting while moving their hand in a sweeping gesture up and down in an overexaggerated fashion. Along with gestures come facial expression and posture. Even if a student has effective gestures, the piece still is not life-like if you can not see the hurt/pain in the person's eyes, notice the grimace on their face and determine which character is addressing you by their posture. Many times inexperienced judges ignore the physical aspect of a performance on the ballot; yet without the physical, a student is not believable.

Another area that a judge should mention on the ballot is characterization. This is another important area that the critic should keep on their mind. Characterization helps to bring the words off of the page and make them seem alive. In this category, a critic should look to see how the character is portrayed. A person judging would want to ask themselves if the performer has made the correct choices in expressing emotion. Judges should ask, for example, if the character is too angry, or

are they very level and monotone expressing virtually no emotion. Either way, it would be considered a mistake to have emotions that were so rough. Energy level and variance also add to the characterization of a piece. Focal points are similarly important aspects of a good performance. Again, if these elements are mixed they give the audience false cues and serve to muddle the performance. There are many things that go into this aspect of the performance, and judges need to attend to all of them.

Vocalization is the next area that should receive attention on a critic's ballot. This is another area that often gets overlooked on the lay person's ballot. In this category, a critic should look for proper rate, pausing, range of voice, accent and selected voice. A performer who is unable to execute a variety of rates as called for in the piece is limiting the performance. A performer also needs to be aware of the voice that they select for their characters. At times, a performer will mix or blend voices, or select voices that are too close in sound, thus creating confusion in the minds of the audience. A good performer also understands that moments need to develop, instead of being rushed into, and must know how to execute pauses at the proper time. All of these areas call for the critic to look below the surface of a performance and find the true parts that make up the piece.

The final category that a judge must look for in a performance is the performer's technique. Many things go into

the technique. The choice to use or not use a teaser is a technique that should be considered by the critic and competitor alike. The critic must also decide if the performer has selected the proper material for the teaser. They should ask themselves, "is the teaser briefly introducing me and leading me into the piece, or does it not make sense, even after the piece has begun." A teaser should serve as an attention getter and really grab the audience. Also included in technique is the introduction. The introduction is a place often misused by students. Introductions must briefly introduce the audience to the piece, while including an audience and motivational link. It is these two links that are missing from many introductions, and a good judge should expect them to be present. Further, a critic should also consider the cutting. Does it have a plot, does it go somewhere, or does it leave the audience wondering at the end, or end too soon. Even if a performer has not read or seen the entire body of literature, this often is evident in poor cutting choices. Other areas to take into consideration are the length of a piece, is it memorized, are transitions executed properly and smoothly, is the script book used properly, is there some variation in pieces, does the stated theme match the literature, and is the ending strong. All of these items are crucial to a good performance and should appear on a judge's ballot. The final and most important aspect of the technique is whether the performer combines characterization, vocalization and physical delivery to create imagery. Imagery is essential to a

performance. It is the difference between my becoming a part of your piece or my just seeing you read to me. A good performance is one that is brought to life and pulls in the audience. A judge needs to be well versed in order to understand the complexities of imagery. Imagery does not just happen, it occurs when a performer becomes the character.

Discussion

When comparing my study with the ideas that past scholarship has suggested, it is clear that we are in agreement that a critic's job is a very important one. Different methods have been discussed in order to reach the ends, but all are in agreement that a blank ballot or one that just says, "good job" is not acceptable. While most critics do strive to write a good ballot, they must remember that meaningful ballot writing is an on going process. Even the most experienced judges can hone their skills, even if it means that they work on improving their handwriting so that their ballot can be read. Hanson, as mentioned earlier when outlining the traits of a good judge, states that it is "important for judges to try even harder to offer some comments which can lead to growth and opportunities for the contestant" (18). When writing a ballot, a person should keep in mind that examples and explanations make comments easy to understand and adapt to and they help make comments less vague. Combining these things with Olson and Wells' call for a reason for decision on every ballot and Jensen's urge for judges to take responsibility will lead to better ballots and better ballot

writers.

Summary

When one considers all of the things that must go into ballot writing, they will surely realize how important the job of filling out the ballot is to a student's performance. The ballot is the only thing that a contestant has to evaluate their performance at tournaments. If a judge is unwilling to keep the above listed criteria in mind, then a student's performance will suffer or stagnate. It takes a village to raise a good competitor, and everyone must play their part, so grab a doughnut, slam a soda and be ready with the necessary criteria to write an effective ballot. You have to be there anyway, so why not make your mark.

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